

# An Interview with Sterling Van Wagenen



Photo Courtesy of Sterling Van Wagenen – [mormonartist.net](http://mormonartist.net)

**Interviewed by Dean Duncan  
Theatre and Media Arts Department History Project 2011**

My name is Sterling Van Wagenen. I was born in Provo, Utah, and went to Provo High School. I served a mission for the LDS Church on the East Coast, then went to Brigham Young University and had a double major in theatre and philosophy. I graduated the same year I got married, 1972. We had six children, all of whom are grown now.

I got into film very early on; it was a transition from theatre. I had my first job in Los Angeles working as an assistant director to a remarkable man named Jonathan Miller who came from England. He was directing a production of Shakespeare's *Richard II* with Richard Chamberlain; that was my first exposure to the world of Los Angeles.

Gradually, over a period of time, I worked for what was then the BYU Motion Picture Studio as a casting director. I managed to get myself fired from that job, and then had an idea with a close friend of mine to start a film festival, because we didn't think we could see any decent films in Utah. We started what was called the Utah US Film Festival, and got Robert Redford involved because we were looking at a component of the festival focused on independent film. That evolved, to make a very long story short, into the Sundance Institute and then into the Sundance Film Festival. From there, I moved on to produce some feature films and direct some documentaries—I've done work for PBS and for Discovery Channel, and I've had a long and interesting career. I worked as dean of a film school for five years in Orlando, Florida, at the University of Central Florida, and I'm still alive and still working.

## **Morality in Media**

My passion for the theatre came from Classics Illustrated comic books. When I was in the fifth grade, we had a teacher who, when we finished our homework at quiet time, would bring out these Classics Illustrated comic books. I read *Hamlet* and I read *Macbeth*; I began to write poetry and I was transfixed by these stories by Shakespeare. That, in many ways, was the spark for me. I've always been fascinated by movies—I love movies, love comic books, read a lot of science fiction. In that sense, I was certainly a child of the 50's and the early 60's.

I not only read the Classics Illustrated comic books, which introduced me to Shakespeare and Conrad and Jack London, I went from the comic books to the actual books, unlike many of my peers, who just read the comic books. I also read all of the EC comics, the DC comics, Batman, Superman, Green Lantern—I read all of that stuff when I was a kid.

There's a question about dangerous media and what children are exposed to. I didn't realize this until many years later, but my parents had the philosophy that Hugh Nibley, in fact, embraced about his own children: "No, let him read whatever he wants because at some point, he's going to figure out what the good stuff is and he's going to change his mind."

For me, that worked. Maybe that doesn't work for a lot of people, but the freedom that my parents gave me to read, to look, to see movies—I never had any boundaries about what movies I could see, what I couldn't see.

I would occasionally get the comment, "That's not such a good thing for you to be watching," but I really didn't have any boundaries.

As I've just said, for some people that's not such a good thing, but for me, it spurred my curiosity about the world, and that turned out to be a good thing for me.

I do remember some films—I mean I had, like a lot of adolescent boys my age, *Playboy* magazines that were circulated pretty freely in high school and in the locker rooms; I suppose I wasn't any different from any of the other kids in the sense that it was pretty exciting. I saw some movies, and I guess if I had to choose again now, I probably should have missed them. But I do believe in repentance; repentance is a great principle.

Nibley's point, when he was asked once how he could allow his children to believe in Santa Claus when they were younger—because Nibley was such a brilliant scholar and knew so much about the gospel and its doctrine—his answer was simple: “I want them to be able to change their mind.”

Changing your mind is, in fact, a fundamental point in the process of repentance. If you never have to change your mind about anything, it's very difficult to repent.

The question is, is there a difference between a sin and a mistake when you consume certain kinds of media? Some things are not that clear. To a large degree, it has to do with the point that C. S. Lewis makes in his little book *An Experiment in Criticism*; that point is that a book is not necessarily a good book because it's a classic, a good book may be a good book because of the way it can be read.

I think there's a certain truth there in terms of movies as well. Some movies, in a strict sense, may not be sins, but given certain predilections in the viewer—predilections in terms of being titillated by narratives of revenge or materialism, for example—they can turn into sins. So it becomes a matter of an education in a spiritual sense, but also in a more traditional sense. It becomes a matter of an education sensibility—*educated* means knowing spiritually what your boundaries and limitations are. In my personal experience, it would never have worked for somebody to tell me what those boundaries were. I had to reach out and test the waters and find out for myself where those boundaries were.

For example, I was completely obsessed by horror films when I was growing up in the 50's. Of course, horror films meant something different than they did when *Halloween* came in, or with *Friday the 13th*, when the slasher genre became somewhat coextensive with the horror film. When I was young, in elementary and junior high school, the most compelling horror movies were the science fiction horror films about atomic disaster, giant insects and spiders, and aliens. Then they were the classic, universal horror films with the Outsider, the Frankenstein's monster, the vampire, the werewolf—all of these creatures who were trying to exercise power in a society or in a culture that had completely ostracized them, where they were taboo as sentient beings.

Quite unconsciously, I found myself attracted to those outsider beings who, in some supernatural way, were trying to exercise power in an environment where they were inherently powerless, or where people were trying to make them powerless. I was an only child, so that was an appealing scenario to me. It took many years for me to sort that out and figure out why I was so attracted to that genre particularly, and it had a lot to do with myself. Once I figured that out, the appeal of those films receded into the background.

I think it's a highly individual thing. It's a constant problem—not problem, it's a constant effort of testing the world and being spiritually sensitive enough, so when you push here and you realize that's not a place that's safe to go, you can withdraw or pull back. I know there's a lot of conversation about addiction, and addiction it seems to me is fundamentally a process of pushing on something and never withdrawing. It's a real tricky equation, but the fundamental issue here, it seems to me, is why we're here on the earth: and that is to test the propositions of good and evil, not in some rigid, codified system, but to test the propositions of good and evil vicariously, which is one of the values of art.

I think one of the great lessons of certain kinds of films, and certain works of art, is that none of us is wholly good or bad. In fact, the films and works of art that tend to polarize the human personality and push people to those simplistic extremes, in some ways do more damage than the ones that demonstrate the human condition as one of ambiguity—one where choice is always present. I've never been able to grab ahold of the idea that you make a certain moral choice and you only make it once, and you never have to make it again. If there was no such thing as the flow of time, if there was no such thing as the impact of experience, then that maybe would be possible—but we don't live in a static environment.

The great lesson of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*—and I think this fundamentally is what the film is about—is that it's about a human being who tries to stop time. When he does that, he goes mad. This is, of course, the Norman Bates character; that's why he's doing the taxidermy on all those birds. The birds

were a metaphor for his mother, and he tries to stop his mother in time, which is why he uses the chemicals on her. So he tries to stop time, and every time something intrudes on his world that breaks up that predilection towards rigidity or towards the cessation of time—like experience, growth, decay; then he goes mad and he kills somebody. Of course, his sexual development is at the root of the story, and he's trying to stop it. That's where the real horror in *Psycho* comes: it's not just from the killings, it's from the total extinction of a human personality who has fallen in love with stasis. Damnation—you're damned, you're stopped. You're dammed up. That's what's so horrifying about *Psycho*, much more so than the shower scene.

So what is the ultimate temptation? The ultimate temptation is self-annihilation. That's why it seems to me that if one looks at those films with an analytical eye, and does some real thinking about them, one recognizes when a film touches on that—and this is true of films across a lot of genres. I was talking earlier about *The Wild Bunch*, which is essentially a celebration of self-destruction.

I think every human being at some point, maybe in some major and some minor ways, is tempted toward that abyss of letting go of all responsibility, letting go of who they are. That seems to be the ultimate satanic temptation—to say, *Just let go and annihilate yourself*.

That's the message of, for example, Val Lewton's *The Seventh Victim*. One of the reasons that film is so horrendous is because it's a celebration of extinction. It's a celebration, which is really horrifying.

"I run to Death, and Death meets me as fast." That's the John Donne line.

We all experience that in some way. We all want to give up at certain moments in time when it just seems too difficult, when life just seems too hard.

For me, it's been instructive to see that vicariously through the art form that I fell in love with as a child, to see those instances and say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a minute. What's really going on there?"

That's the ultimate push. When the impulse is toward revenge, that's an impulse toward self-destruction more than it is revenge. It's an impulse that passes through revenge to self-destruction to annihilation to non-existence. That is a dark path, indeed. And a lot of people take it.

I've been doing a lot of reading in the Book of Mormon lately because I'm working on a project for the Church about the Book of Mormon. There was a phrase that I kept coming across again and again, which initially was really puzzling to me. The phrase is a celebration of how merciful our God is. Alma says it, Nephi says it in his own way, Mormon—of all people—and Moroni both say it at the end of the Nephite civilization when everything is falling apart.

What do they mean when they say, "Our God is merciful"?

Then I ran across that passage in Alma where it talks about God creating a space for us to repent, and I thought, *Perhaps one of the meanings of that scripture is that God is merciful because—I'm not sure I can quite get this right, in terms of how I'm thinking about it—it's that God is merciful precisely because he allows health and sickness, pleasure and pain, good and evil, light and dark, because he allows the interplay of those forces, and he allows us to fully experience them*. That may be an aspect of God's mercy, which is connected to our agency as individual conscious entities. I think it's really a question about trust.

Lately I've been very interested, too, in this notion of the Holy Ghost as a constant companion. I was reading the passage in John 16 where it talks about the mission of the Comforter, of the Holy Ghost.

Jesus is talking to his disciples, and he says, "The Holy Ghost doesn't speak of himself, he only speaks that which he hears."

What that suggests to me is that the Holy Ghost doesn't have a personal agenda for us—that there is something utterly, completely selfless. So when we have the companionship of the Holy Ghost, there is no agenda imposed upon us by God. In a sense, it is completely in our self-interest to have that companionship, if we will only yield to it. There's this sense in which yielding to the Holy Ghost is in fact a decision or an ability that strengthens our agency—that strengthens our individuality—precisely because

there is no selfishness in that agenda whatsoever. It's a paradox that's tough to articulate, and I'm sure I've made a muddle of it, but that's where my head is these days.

## Theater and Philosophy

As an undergraduate in college, I didn't quite plan it this way, but it so happened that my dual majors were in the theatre and philosophy. There was always a battle that was going on inside me while I was in college, and there was a part of me that never really took theatre very seriously. I was always in love with actors and acting—which is why I fell in love with my wife and married her, because she was an actress.

But I was really—maybe *obsessed* is slightly too strong of a word, but only slightly—I was obsessed with what happens inside an actor, and particularly inside a great actor. You see an extraordinary performance by someone like Laurence Olivier in his *Othello*, and I was fascinated with a question of how that was possible, how that gets manufactured, which drew me to theatre. At the same time on the philosophy side, I was interested, particularly, in the philosophy of mind. I was very interested in that intersection.

In terms of both theatre and philosophy, I was interested in this business of how one looks at human behavior, and how you account for and explain human behavior at a deep level. That was for me, even though I didn't fully understand it at the time, what was appealing about both disciplines. In the philosophical side, you could read philosophy of mind; you could read epistemology and understand fundamental theories from Kant or from Hegel, or Hume or Locke, about how our mechanisms for sensing and knowing work and how one builds up a worldview. At the same time, I was fascinated with what process a great actor—Marlon Brando, Laurence Olivier—goes through in terms of creating this illusion that they are these characters.

As I've reflected on it after many years, it seems to me that it was that interesting intersection, and that probably was because I was feeling—I talked about this earlier—so much like an outsider. I was trying to figure out the wellsprings of my own behavior, my own desires.

I was interested in philosophical questions like, “What comes first, thought or feeling? What comes first, the idea or the desire? Does the desire come first and then you manufacture justification for it afterwards? Or do you get an idea based on the various kinds of sensory stimuli you get? And that idea then in turn generates desire?”

Of course the answers to that are as complex as the philosophers who've written on the subject. That was interesting to me because I was trying to sort out my place in the world; I was trying to sort out my own behavior. That's how I ended up in that odd place.

There's a question about whether ontology as a subject of study in the philosophical disciplines is safer than the study of epistemology. There are so many different theories about how people come to know, and it's out of epistemology—of course a lot of the neuroscience that is now shifted from theory into sciences has grown in the last twenty or twenty-five years.

The question is a question about safety, and a point about Latter-day Saints having truth claims is interesting. One of my fondest memories of my undergraduate life was in a philosophy class taught by Dr. Terry Warner. We were talking about the various theories of truth, and the correspondence theory and the coherence theory of truth. There was a diagram he handed out to everybody in class, and we went down through all these different theories of truth. I remember there were some students who were mildly disturbed that there were so many different ways of thinking about this thing that they had always considered absolute. Three or four students raised their hands and became very argumentative about what they saw as an attack on the absolute nature of truth.

At the end of this long, very convoluted discussion, I remember Brother Warner said, “Well, I don’t know if the church is true, but it’s the one the Lord and I go to.”

I thought, *You know, that actually makes more sense to me than what I would consider to be absolute truth claims.* Which potentially would get me in a lot of trouble in certain circles.

One of the reasons I kept shifting back and forth between theatre and my love of film and philosophy was—I talked earlier about Arthur Henry King, who was also a professor that I admired very much—I heard something from Arthur that all of a sudden made me feel very comfortable. In many ways—I guess it’s not too much to say—it defined who I am, and this was the value of my undergraduate education at BYU.

Arthur said, “The ultimate reality is a loving person,” another loving person—meaning the Savior, meaning Christ.

I took from that statement the notion that at the end of the day, when Christ says, “I am the way the truth and the life,” he doesn’t say the law, or the rules, or the regulations, or epistemological systems, or a philosophical code of conduct. He doesn’t say *those* are the way the truth and the life, he says, “I am. Ego eimi. I am the way.”

Again, for me that was an initial draw into film, an initial draw into how as a Latter-day Saint—because of the highly personal anthropomorphic nature of God I believe in—that could be potentially translated for me into another discipline where you’re dealing with the sacredness of human feeling and human experience. That’s what attracted me later in my career to Horton Foote, because when the opportunity came along for me to produce *Trip to Bountiful*, I knew already two films that Horton Foote had written; *To Kill a Mockingbird* was one, and *Tender Mercies* was another. I had been enthralled with both of those films because they were so deeply human, in the sense that they were revelatory of the sacred feelings of human beings. I thought Horton had seen something—he’d gotten something in his writing, in his worldview, in the way he thought about characters, and I was hungry to work with that kind of an artist. So when the opportunity came, I jumped at it.

In a sense, the best things I’ve been involved with as a filmmaker grew out of my education at BYU—out of the influence that people like Terry Warner and Arthur King and Hugh Nibley had on me as a relatively naïve and kind of arrogant, stupid undergraduate—we’re entitled to be arrogant and stupid when we’re undergraduates. It’s fine.

So in terms of my personal experience, that’s really the definition of a BYU education. I was always happiest when there was an intersection between what I believed as a Latter-day Saint and what I was doing as a filmmaker, whether it was as a producer or a director or whatever it was. It was that intersection that I was always looking for, but found only two or three times.

One thinks that one ought to trust the Savior when he says, “In the world ye shall find tribulation. Be of good cheer for I have overcome the world.”

The Savior, in those great chapters 16 and 17 of John—the great intercessory prayer—doesn’t talk about taking the apostles out of the world. In fact, He talks specifically about them remaining in the world, but trusting in the fact that He has overcome the world. It’s that wonderful paradox that has always been a tension inside me—I guess intellectually as well as emotionally—which is, *Okay, here’s the world. Yes, I’m attracted over here to the world, but here’s the gospel.*

It’s been this back and forth—I wish I could say that it’s been a straight-and-narrow-iron-rod life. But going through those struggles I think—as I get older now and I think back on my life—have been the point. It’s been that statement of Joseph Smith’s: What we’re here to do is to reconcile contraries. It’s all about trying to reconcile contraries. I think it’s a good thing to struggle with those issues and figure out where your heart really is. It’s opposition in all things. It’s not “Run from the world”; “Hide from the world.” It’s “Get your head screwed on right.”

## Beginnings of the Film Program

There are a couple vivid memories for me about my career as an undergraduate and how that evolved into whatever contribution I made to help and get a film program started. When I was an undergraduate at BYU in the 1960s, there were film classes that were taught in the Communications Department. For some reason, I was never very interested in anything that was going on in Communications. I didn't feel like there was enough passion connected to it. I was interested in the drama and such.

So I never took any of the classes in the Communications Department, but if you go back and you dig with people, for example, with Scott Swofford or Reid Smoot—Reid remembers very well that there was a film appreciation class taught over in Communications.

When I was a senior at BYU, I was asked by Charles Metten—I can't remember if he was department chair or if he was a professor at the time—if I would be willing to teach a continuing education class in film appreciation.

Charles Metten was a theatre teacher, and he was probably more of a booster of the idea of a film program than anybody else at BYU. He passionately wanted to see that happen, because he believed in film as the medium of our time, more so than theatre—which, of course, was heresy for the other members of the theatre department.

So I was asked, because I'd gotten to know him—actually I'd known him both in the theatre department and the honors program—I was asked if I would teach a class in, quote, “film appreciation.” This was, appallingly, in the days before videotape or DVD, so the only way to see a film was either a rerun on television or if a film was re-released in the theatres. That was the only way. You couldn't go back and check a scene, so film criticism had a very different life—a life that was more personal than maybe film criticism has become in our day and age.

I said, “Yes, I'll teach a film class.”

So they signed me up for a contract with Continuing Education, and we had a room over in the old Jesse Knight Building on campus. It was the little theatre there which held, I think, about a hundred and fifty people. I think the very first year I taught the course, we did film comedy, and I wanted to do Chaplin and Keaton and Lloyd primarily. Lo and behold, I show up the first night to this class—here I am just a senior, right—and every seat is absolutely full. I was amazed, and I think Continuing Education was surprised, too, that it was packed. It was an evening class, and it went to capacity as an evening class.

Now as I look back on it, I think I had a very specious idea of what the pedagogy of teaching a film appreciation class was all about. My idea was that you create a syllabus, you hand out a bunch of notes on the film, then you show the movie and give a test, and that was pretty much it. Later, when I was the dean of the film school at the University of Central Florida, I was always appalled that teachers would actually use class time to show films. That's something I've come to believe should be done in a lab situation, not an actual class. I thought that was an abdication on the part of the teacher. Nevertheless, that's what I did.

The class evolved from a class in American film comedy to a class in American film musicals and a class in Hitchcock. This was wonderful for me personally, because I could pick all of Hitchcock's films that I wanted to see, some of which I hadn't, and show them in class. Eventually this all evolved to the idea—I don't remember how, maybe Chuck Metten remembers how this came about—but it evolved to the high point of the class, which was extending an invitation to Frank Capra to come and visit BYU. It was for my class that the invitation got extended, and the idea was to show a bunch of Capra films, of course culminating with *It's a Wonderful Life*, which every young Mormon student loved then, and probably still does.

Lo and behold, to my amazement, I was authorized by the department to send a letter to him, to his home in Palm Desert, and within a week or ten days, he responded positively and said, “Yes, I’d love to come.”

I think everybody, including myself, was in absolute shock that this great American filmmaker had agreed to come to BYU. BYU had never done anything like that before. So Capra came, and instead of the auditorium in the Jesse Knight Building, we filled the auditorium in the old Joseph Smith Building, which held around a thousand people. Capra came and introduced three of his films, *It Happened One Night*, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, and one other I don’t remember. Then he took questions, talked to the class members, met with students in the theatre department, and did an interview for KBYU. It was a wonderful three days; he and his wife were absolutely delightful.

I learned, personally, a very interesting lesson from Capra because I got to pick him up at his hotel every day and bring him to campus. I escorted him around, and we actually kept up a correspondence for a couple of years after that; I still have his letters tucked in my copy of his autobiography. The thing I learned from Capra was when students would ask questions that were—I guess the best way to say it is questions that were somewhat derogatory about other films they had seen.

They would ask Capra questions like, “Well, I just saw this film with Jack Nicholson in it called *Five Easy Pieces*, and I was so offended by that film.”

I thought, *Here’s Capra, whom we revere because of the great moral sensibility he had about the underdog*. I was so impressed with Capra’s generosity, because he would never respond to a derogatory question.

He would always say something like, “Yes, you may not have liked the film, but if only you knew how difficult it is to get any film made, you would see any film with more”—I can’t remember the word he used, it may have been *compassion*. “You would be more generous in your attitude toward any film if only you knew what it cost these filmmakers to get their films made.”

There was this generosity of attitude about a filmmaker who’d won every award—what, four academy awards?—and his films had made money, and he’d also made films that lost money. I was just deeply impressed with his generosity. It was a great lesson for me at the time.

## **Sundance Film Festival**

I asked Chuck Metten for ideas about a film festival one day, and he said, “Well I don’t know what you should do, but you should talk to somebody I know; you should talk to Arthur Knight.”

Knight was a professor of film and had written a wonderful history of film called *The Liveliest Art*. He was teaching at USC at the time, so Chuck Metten gave me the number, and I called up Arthur Knight. We talked for maybe fifteen or twenty minutes, and I explained to him what we were trying to do with this little festival in Salt Lake City.

Arthur said, “I have an idea for you. I’ve been traveling around the country, I’ve seen all these young people graduating from film schools and they’re making their own regional feature films low budget—I mean they’re getting money from their parents or doctors or dentists or their credit cards, and they’re making these stories that are really reflective of regional life and regional culture.” He added, “Nobody in this country is paying attention to those kinds of low-budget regional feature films.”

We thought, *Great, nobody else is doing it; that’s what we’ll do*.

That’s what attracted Robert Redford’s attention to the festival: independent cinema—independent of the Hollywood studio system. That’s really what it meant, though it’s no longer so clear that independent film is any longer independent of the Hollywood studio system. But that turned out to be what Redford was interested in.



So with the genealogy of ideas, it went from Chuck Metten to Arthur Knight to this idea that sparked Redford's interest, which turned into the Sundance Institute, the Sundance Film Festival. It kick started the independent film movement in America. That's the genealogy of those ideas.

## Film Scholarship

I was talking earlier about Craig Detweiler's book. Detweiler does something interesting: he looks at the great films of the 70's, 80's, 90's, and even though some of those films are R rated films—like *The Godfather* films, and so forth—he finds the good in those films, which I think is a rare gift. As opposed to looking at the things that are dark and are bad about the films, Detweiler finds the spiritual message that is often imbedded and carefully concealed in the film. Craig Detweiler is an evangelical pastor who teaches film at Pepperdine University.

It is, again, this interesting razor's edge for students to discover stuff that they may not necessarily agree with, that may not make them comfortable, and yet at the same time, let their sensitivities evolve in terms of their relationship to the Holy Ghost, to the Holy Spirit. That is a balance. It is "Straight is the gate and narrow is the way that leads to life, and few there be that find it." It doesn't mean "Fall off to the left," and it doesn't mean to "Fall off to the right," but it means "Straight is the gate and narrow is the way." It is a tightrope walk, and that's the way it's supposed to be. It's those paradoxes embedded in the scriptures.

It's a scary question, a question that, I think, implies the history of western culture for the last two hundred years. Which has certainly pointed the artist, in any number of disciplines, toward the heroic. Even postmodernism, in some sense, stands on the shoulders of the 18th and 19th century romantic ideal for the artist.

That romantic ideal at its most fundamental is "I create." And therefore, "What I create has a privileged position."

It brings to mind an essay that Terry Warner and Arthur Henry King wrote—both former BYU professors: Arthur King dead now, and Terry Warner retired from the philosophy department. They wrote an essay that was a riff on an essay by T. S. Eliot, called "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In their essay, they reversed the title and called it "Talent and the Individual Tradition." They make this very interesting argument that the idea of an individual talent is really a myth, because no artist can create in a complete vacuum. Every artist is dependent on the voices of the predecessors in the particular genre and the particular form, and even in the particular ideas that the artist processes in order to make the work of art. There are echoes around any artist all the time, of voices that that artist heard and responded to that come out of a particular tradition.

So in a sense, with proper humility, any good artist—maybe John Ford—ought to say, "Yes, here are the influences," and sometimes this is not always conscious. "Yes, here are the influences that brought me to *The Searchers*."

Or if you're Mizoguchi, "Here are the influences that brought me to *Sanshōdayū*"

I think this notion of an artist who's not fully collaborative with his own tradition is almost a non sequitur. It doesn't make, at some level, any sense. That's not every artist who will admit that.

Art is genealogical. When you ask the question "Is art genealogical?," you extend the metaphor. You would maybe want to talk again metaphorically about what kind of DNA has been imprinted, for better or for worse, from the culture that you grew up in that you embraced, and whose ideas you embraced, for better and for worse.

That's true with most artists, unless they've gone around the bend in some way. The difficulty with our culture is that we have become so tolerant of essentially any mode that presents itself, or poses,

as creativity. We've become so tolerant of any sort of creative enterprise that when anybody pushes back on a creative enterprise, you know immediately they're branded as being intolerant, or they're branded as whatever they're branded as. I was thinking about Robert Mapplethorpe, for example. We defend even artists who, in this sense, embrace the self-destructive impulse—that annihilation that takes you down a very dark path. We're even willing to defend that.

When a culture or a civilization reaches a point where these boundaries begin to disappear, then it starts to get difficult to talk about what a civilization really means, or what a culture really means. It also comes back to this fundamental idea that Kierkegaard talks about in *Fear and Trembling*.

Kierkegaard says, "Look, if you're a shepherd, what is the measure of your shepherd-ness? Well, it's the flocks that you tend. If you are a successful or a good shepherd, then you will tend and protect your flocks, and that's how you measure your identity in that area." He says the same thing is true if you're a king. "How do you measure the fact that you're a good king? Well you measure it by the health, the welfare of your subjects." Then Kierkegaard asks the question "Well then what does it mean if you take God as your measure?"

Of course his point is that it opens up the possibilities of identity infinitely. But if you don't take God as your measure, and your measure is merely, as Robert Bolt says in *A Man for All Seasons*, Wales—you know that wonderful line when Paul Scofield says to John Hurt, "What it profits a man to give his soul for the whole world...but for Wales!" He became the Attorney General of Wales.

So these are questions that have a lot of assumptions built into them, and the assumptions really do have to do with relationships. They have to do with our relationships with other people, how we see the value of other people, and how the notion of the divine plays into that.

Is that obscure? "I trust I make myself obscure."

### Scholarly vs. Practical Aspects

How do you reconcile the scholarly with the practical aspects of actually making movies? I had an experience that came out of my BYU education; Harold Oaks was, at that time, directing on the Pardoe stage. (I have him to thank for this experience.) The issue of the genealogy of influences or ideas has always been very important to me. To recognize where an idea comes from so that the right person gets involved in the chain of credit, or the chain of honor, that comes. The answer to this question of reconciliation actually has a genealogy with Harold Oaks in the department.

Harold had invited an agent, a real dyed-in-the-wool Hollywood agent, who worked, at the time, for ICM (International Creative Management). He was a young agent who'd come out from New York and was on the rise in the agency in LA. He decided to make a trip through the Intermountain West looking for new and exciting talent. Harold was one of the few people in the department who actually loved the idea of this agent coming and meeting with our students. I remember there was a lot of grumbling about the idea that Harold was bringing in an evil influence from Los Angeles and so forth, but he was determined to do it.

I was lucky enough to be a student who was invited to a dinner with this agent. As luck would have it, the agent and I—because, as I indicated to you earlier, I was an arrogant little prig when I was an undergraduate. I was an arrogant guy, and full of vinegar. So as it happened, I got into an argument with this agent, about morality and film, of all things—of course, what else would a BYU student argue about with a Hollywood agent?

I remember somebody said to me after the evening was over, "Well, there goes your chance to make a connection with anybody in Hollywood."

I thought, *Yeah, well, that's probably right. I probably tanked that.*

Then much to my surprise, the next morning I got a call from Harold Oaks, who said, “This fellow, Frank Levy, would like you to drive him to the airport.”

I said, “Okay, Fine.”

We went to the airport and I was driving him up and we got in a conversation and he was telling me about the projects he was working on. He said, “If you’re interested, I think I can get you a job in the marketing department of the LA Music Center,” which had the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, and it had the smaller theatre connected to it whose name I’ve now forgotten.

I thought, *Well, that’s very flattering, that’s very cool, but I’m not really interested in that.* So much to his shock, I turned him down, thinking, *Well that’s the end of that.*

About a month later, I got another telephone call from Frank Levy, and this time he said, “Look, Henry Fond is staging a production of *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial* at the Dorothy Chandler. I can get you a job as Henry Fonda’s assistant director.”

Again, this is either a measure of my arrogance—or it’s a measure of being pretty clear about what I was interested in—but I said, “That’s a great opportunity; thank you so much. I hope you don’t think I’m ungrateful, but that’s just not something I really want to do.”

I really thought that was it.

A month later, I got a third call, and he said, “Okay, this is your last chance. Jonathan Miller is coming from London to direct Richard Chamberlain in a production of Shakespeare’s *Richard II*.”

All of a sudden, in my mind the stars aligned, because a) it was Shakespeare, b) I knew who Jonathan Miller was—he had just finished a stint as the associate director of the National Theatre in London and directed Laurence Olivier and Joan Plowright in what was then the definitive production of *The Merchant of Venice*. I also knew that Jonathan Miller was a medical doctor, and I also knew that Jonathan Miller had just written a book, essentially an extended essay or meditation on the Canadian thinker—not Northrop Frye—the media expert, Marshall McLuhan. And I also knew that Jonathan Miller had been teaching the history of medicine at University College London. And I also knew that Jonathan Miller had been a comedian and had done a show that played in the West End in London and on Broadway called *Beyond the Fringe*, which was the precursor of the Monty Python humor.

I knew all of this about Jonathan Miller because I was something of a groupie in terms of London theatre, so I said, “Yes, I’ll take that job.”

For me, that was the defining experience that confirmed to me that it was possible to have a creative life, but also a life that was engaged with ideas—that they didn’t have to exist in two different worlds. I could pick Jonathan Miller up at his hotel every morning and we’d drive to the rehearsals at the music center, and he would give me books—he would give me books by Edgar Wind about iconology and about renaissance art. Film is all the arts.

We’d talk about Bergson, we’d talk about what it meant, we’d talk about his interests in neurology and research in terms of the human brain—and it opened for me psychologically, I guess, as well as intellectually, the idea that you didn’t have to reject ideas in order to be a practitioner. And even though you were engaged with ideas, you could, in fact, also be a practitioner. So that’s what changed my world around in terms of reconciling the scholarly and practical aspects of film.

## **BYU Education**

A way of summarizing—I really owe to my BYU education the fact that I could move between theatre and teaching film and the philosophy department, and the key defining influences for me that, for better or for worse, influenced the rest of my life and my career, really came out of that undergraduate experience at BYU. It really did. It came from people like Chuck Metten, Terry Warner, Arthur King, and Harold Oaks. I owe everything to those teachers.

I think that BYU acknowledges the fact—and Joseph Smith acknowledged the fact—that we, as Latter-day Saints, embrace truth from wherever it may come.

What was Joseph Smith's phrase? "Gather up all the truth you can from whatever source, and you will come out true Latter-day Saints."

In my life, that's been a true principle. Certainly there have been dark roads that I have taken periodically, and there have been stumbles and there have been falls. But at the same time, I feel such gratitude for the experience I had at BYU that allowed me to cross those boundaries, and not have to have an education with experience where I had blinders on. It was opportunities to connect with these remarkable people.

It certainly triggers something for me when we come back to this word "film appreciation." Another legacy that came to me from BYU—in fact from a very young man, at the time, who was teaching in the philosophy department named Jerry Bradford, who is now the director of the Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship.

We got into an animated discussion—I remember this very vividly—with Jerry Bradford. I was taking an honors class, and I got in a very energetic discussion with him—and again, I'm sure arrogant and all of those things.

What was it Nibley said about himself? "I was just a little showoff."

I was just an insufferable little show off.

So Bradford gave me this book, which, again, totally turned my head around. The book was by a critic named George Steiner, who I have talked about previously. The book was called *In Bluebeard's Castle*. That led me to another book of Steiner's, a book of essays called *Language and Silence*. In that book, Steiner has an essay called, "To Civilize our Gentlemen," and he asks a question that was revolutionary for me as an undergraduate.

That question is, "Do the humanities humanize?"

Steiner talked about criticism, and this is what defined my thinking about film criticism over the course of my life.

Steiner said, "Look, an act of criticism—really, let's face the fact that critics are like eunuchs. They may be able to love and to enjoy a work of art, but the true gift of a critic is to look at the work of art and then to be able to, with passionate prose and writing, communicate the love and the passion they have for that work of art to an audience." And then Steiner said, "A great work of art is like whirlwind that blows through your mind. It tips the chairs over and knocks the furniture around, blows everything and rearranges everything, and you have to put it all back together again." He said, "That's what great criticism is all about. It's about communicating that kind of passion for a work of art."

That, combined with Steiner's question about "Do the humanities really humanize?," made me start looking for the first time in a much more critical way at the moral center at the heart of any given film—particularly for me any given film—or a piece of music or a novel or whatever. There's a sense in which it was the reading of George Steiner that convinced me about film appreciation.

I used to get so frustrated with some of the students in those appreciation classes, and even later on after I left BYU and I was invited back to teach some "Film Appreciation" classes again. I used to get so frustrated with the students—and this was my failure as a teacher—who could only see movies as these artifacts intended to entertain us, like cotton candy is intended to titillate our taste at a carnival. Again, Steiner is the one who opened my eyes to what the pedagogy of teaching film could be all about: really opening a door to a student in a way that blows the stuff all around and gets them to rethink.

Unfortunately, I found too few students who were interested in that. It is a two-way street. There is so much more to this business of seeing a film.

Ultimately, it takes me back to the fall of man, which I am still upset about. It seems to me that to come to terms with the atonement—and I can mention some works of art that have helped in that way—to

really come to terms with the atonement begins with the recognition that the world is broken. That primal cosmic covenant that was made in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve were ejected, that covenant was shattered by design. God introduced two contradictory commandments that were intended to shatter the covenant that spiritually held everything together. That was by design. We must appreciate the fact that the fall was necessary, but with that necessity comes the paradox of things being completely and totally broken—and the only way that things can be made whole again is by remaking that covenant with the Savior through the atonement.

I don't want this to sound highfalutin, but for me, I've always been trying to figure out why things are broken and how to fix them. That's what's drawn me again and again back to the atonement of the Savior. Even though I've drifted, occasionally, far away, I've never found a solution to that fundamental problem of why things are broken and how can they be fixed? I obviously believe that the only answer to that is through the atonement of Christ.